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The Finer Points Of Ritual

A Comparative Approach to Liturgical History, Theology and Design
A Heartland Pagan Festival Keynote Address

Mike Nichols
(http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/7280/index.html)

Participants:

- Morning Glory Zell
- Otter Zell
- Rhiannon Bennett
- Carolyn Clark
- Eldoreth Grey Squirrel
- Anahita
- Morwen
- Chris
- Dix
- other audience members not identified

[NOTE: This transcription was made from an audio tape dub of a videorecording of the event. The microphone placement made some of the comments from the audience unintelligible, and those sections were omitted. In some cases, the comments were picked up but it was impossible to identify the speaker. Because of the lack of visual cues, it is also possible that some of the speakers are incorrectly identified. To improve readability, some very minor editing was done.]

Rhiannon: I'd like to introduce someone whom we are really proud to have in our community. He has been involved in Witchcraft -- in teaching free Witchcraft classes -- for over eighteen years now. He is also a teacher of parapsychology at the University of Missouri at Kansas City. He owns the Magick Lantern, which is our occult

bookstore here in town -- the ONLY occult bookstore we actually have here in town. He's very instrumental in introducing people to Wicca through his classes -- over 6,000 people! Granted all of them didn't decide to stay with us, which is fine. But think how many myths that helped shatter, and helped to make us a valid religion in some people's eyes. And a lot of times, that's what we need. Every time I say something about a particular speaker, people say "Well, what has he written? What has she written?" Books are really wonderful but, as I'm sure you've read, there are some good books, and there are some mediocre books, and there are some that are pure trash out there. Just because they say they're a Pagan writer doesn't mean a thing. Sort through and pick out the good stuff. People like Mike help us go through and figure out what's real and what's not real. And then help you decide, even out of what's real, what's real for you. So I'm really proud to have him in our community, and I'd like to welcome him.

(APPLAUSE)

Mike Nichols: I hope you don't mind if I do this sitting down. I want to present it more like a workshop than a standard lecture. First of all, I want to start out with a few thank you's. I just want to say a personal thank you to Rhiannon who has acted as liaison between the Heartland Spiritual Alliance and the Magick Lantern, which was sometimes a difficult and thankless task, but she's done it well. When I saw her stand on the chair in the hall last night and scream "TWO pieces of chicken! ONLY two!", I thought I've never seen anyone look so much in their element. (LAUGHTER) So thank you so much. And not only to Rhiannon, but to the organizers of the Heartland Pagan Festival all together. I think they've done a wonderful job. Let's give them a hand.

(APPLAUSE)

What we're going to be doing in here is kind of an advanced class on ritual design, what we sometimes like to call liturgics. Before this is all over, we're going to be into such areas as liturgical theology, liturgical history, and liturgical aesthetics. For those of you who are local and who have taken my class, or seen me do speeches at psychic fairs and such, you will be happy to note that this is not recycled material. This is the very first time I am presenting any of this material anywhere. So I hope you enjoy it.

I'm starting from the premise that most people here are already fairly well advanced in Paganism and have gotten to the point where they already know about ritual and realize why it's there, why there is a need for it, and are beginning to ask other questions about ritual. What does it take to make a "good" ritual? What kind of elements do you need to have, what kind of order, what kind of structure does a ritual have to have to work? Are there certain things a ritual needs to work? How can you tell if a ritual has worked? And questions like that start happening only after you've been into it a little while.

If you are new to this whole area, and really are not that conversant with why ritual is used anyway, let me just gloss that point by saying there are a couple of really good books that I think give you a good understanding of that. One is "The Spiral Dance" by Starhawk. Another is "Drawing Down the Moon" by Margot Adler. I think either one of those would inform you as to why Witches use ritual in the first place.

The need for ritual is sometimes one of the most difficult things for newcomers in this area to understand because quite often, if they've been brought up in a religious tradition that downplays ritual, for example, (and many Protestant religious traditions say that ritual is only so much gobbledy-gook, etc., that there's nothing to it), it's a real stumbling block for people to understand why the ritual is there. I've noticed that people with Roman Catholic backgrounds or a background in Judaism seem to have a better grasp on what ritual is there for and what it accomplishes.

When we get into this kind of work, let me just say that much of my talk here today is going to be highly speculative, highly theoretical, and please do not take it as a final position paper on anything. It is at best a preliminary report on work in progress. We're going to do a lot of comparative liturgics as a way of understanding our own ritual development.

When it comes to ritual or liturgy -- whichever word you want to use, and I'm going to be using them interchangeably -- it has always seemed to me that liturgical theology should be on the cutting edge of theological concerns in Paganism. There are many religious writers who believe that religions basically have three dimensions -- any religion. First of all, it's theology: what are it's beliefs? Secondly, it's social structure: how does this religion impact on the world around it? And thirdly, it's ritual: what do the people do to express their religious values? It has always seemed to me that within Paganism in general, and Witchcraft certainly in particular, it is the liturgical dimension that is the most often in focus.

Theology I think has been rather slow. It is developing, Pagan theological concerns, but it's developing late. If you read Starhawk and Adler and people like that, you're beginning to see the beginnings of Pagan theology.

As far as the social dimension, there was a time of course when Paganism had a social dimension, when most people were Pagan. But for the last couple of thousand years we have been a minority religion -- a very small minority in some cases. And I think because of that we don't yet have a very strong sociological impact. But that too may be changing, through festivals like this, when Pagans start gathering in big enough numbers to start talking about such things as social change. For example, at one of the workshops we had the other day, somebody suggested that one of the things Pagans could do to increase their visibility and positive image in the community is to take on community projects like answering telephones for the local public TV telethons. Yes, this is our local Coven on the phone lines! (LAUGHTER) Or this is the local Coven who have all decided to go down and do a park clean-up on a particular day. When we get enough people doing stuff like that, then Witchcraft will have its social dimension.

In the meantime, the strongest dimension I think for most of us is the ritual, is the liturgy. When you tell somebody you're a Witch, the first thing they ask you is "What do you do?" -- not "What do you believe?" or "What is your impact on society?" -- but "What do you do?" They want to hear about your rituals. I think that's exactly why Stewart Farrar titled his first book on Witchcraft "What Witches Do".

So we've got to start looking at what we do, in terms of ritual and how ritual has developed. However, when it comes to trying to study liturgy in modern Paganism, you are immediately arrested by the fact that there is no coherent study of it. Yes, there are books of rituals. Sure, you can buy a spellbook here, a grimoire there. Marion Weinstein has published a Book of Shadows. The last half of Doreen Valiente's book is a Book of Shadows. Scott Cunningham's got books of spells, etc. But is there any systematic study of all this stuff put together? No. Not so far.

I think the reason is because development has been so rapid. All of this stuff has come along so fast that people have not had a chance to assess it and evaluate it, and ask significant questions about it. Consequently, both the scholar and the lay person really don't have very many places to go when it comes to this.

There are a few things though that you can say about religious ritual. First of all, religious ritual is a human experience, a very universal human experience. It is as real as fear, and as important as love. It has a meaning of its own. It is not some sort of aberration or distortion of reality. It is an injection of new meaning into the reality around you. There is hardly a culture in the world that has not developed its religious rituals. And sometimes by looking at religious rituals of other cultures, we can begin understanding our own better. That's one of things I'm gonna try to do here.

There's a strange continuity, a sameness when you start looking at different rituals, that pervades all of them. We find that rituals, for example, are transpersonal and transcultural. People seem to experience the same types of things no matter where you look all over the world.

In looking at liturgical theology, I have been doing an awful lot of work in terms of comparative study. Because the only group of people who have systematically writing about liturgical theology for any length of time are the Christians. Does this have anything to say to us as Pagans? Perhaps it does. Reason: I think most Pagans are by now well aware of the fact that the Christians have borrowed a heck of a lot from the old Pagan religions. For

example, it's commonly known that the old Pagan holidays served as models for Christian holidays, so that the modern Christian liturgical calendar is to a great extent based on older Pagan themes. And ironically, sometimes you can look at what Christians have written about these to find out still more about the Pagan themes that underlie it.

A second area where this is true is what we call hagiography, the study of saints. So many of the saints in the rites of the Roman Catholic Church are in fact simply Christianized forms of old Pagan gods and goddesses. So we read about the legends of these saints, and we learn a little bit more about the gods and goddesses underlying those legends. I think Pagans generally realize both of these points. What Pagans do not generally realize is that it is the same as far as liturgical ceremonies go, too. When you get right down to it, Christianity -- especially the way the Roman Catholic Church developed in the early years of Christianity -- borrowed most of its liturgical traditions from the Pagans.

I mean, if you ever stopped and thought about it... For example, within the Roman Catholic Church, there are certain rituals known as "sacraments", right? Do you realize that is a Pagan word? Sacrament comes from the Latin "sacramentum" and was an oath given by a Roman soldier to his gods. It was a ritual setting. We might be well advised once again to reclaim the word sacrament and use it as our own.

According the Catholic Church, a sacrament is an "effective" ritual, which means that it produces an objective effect. This is not just a symbolic commemoration of something. This is something that actually produces a change in reality. This beginning to sound familiar?

Other things which we have long considered primarily Christian -- Again, I'm going to be drawing this almost exclusively from the background of Roman Catholic liturgics, which is one of the ones that is most developed. The High Anglican would be another good source if you wanted to look into this. The practice of "genuflection", of bowing on one knee, originally a Pagan practice. The practice of kissing ritual tools. If you were in a Catholic church, did you ever see a priest pick up a Missal at Mass and kiss it, put it on the altar? The same way a priestess will sometimes kiss her athame after she's used it for an invocation? Yet another custom borrowed by the Christians from the Pagans. So it seems real obvious to me that we could look at the whole question of sacramental rites, and ask what have the various Christian writers had to say about them in terms of how they work, in order to find out what Pagans probably also originally believed about rites and rituals.

Although at a later time the Catholic Church would limit the number of official sacraments to be only seven in number, at an earlier time this was not true. Anything could be seen as a sacrament. A blessing was a sacrament. A holiday, a sacred object, all of these things could be considered sacramental in what they did. As a matter of fact, the first use of the word "sacrament" within a Christian context was not until 210 C.E. and it was by the Church writer Tertulian. He was the first one to use that word in a Christian context, and when he did so, ironically, he accused the Greek mystery religions of having stolen that word from the Christians. Obviously, it was precisely the other way around.

Although today the word sacrament refers primarily to only seven ecclesial rituals within the Catholic Church, all of which -- or at least six of which -- have parallels in Paganism, the word "sacrament" is still used in comparative theology in a much broader sense. Basically, it refers to any hidden reality, any sign or symbol of a hidden reality that is mysterious and sacred. I could be a person, a place, or a thing. Any of these things could be considered sacramental.

From the point of view of Pagan theology, by the way, with its strong emphasis on the theological perspective called "immanence", the in-dwelling quality of the divine force in all of nature, for a Pagan practically anything can become a sacrament. Every rock, every tree, everything is alive with magical and sacred powers which a Pagan can get in touch with and from there connect with the entire universe. That's what a sacrament is.

There have been, historically, at least two ways of viewing rituals and sacraments. The first is the way as practiced by social anthropologists. For example, one of the most famous of these was proposed by Arnold van Gennep, who was the first to come up with the idea of rituals being, as he called them, "rites of passage". He would point to something like a marriage rite, and we can find rites like that in practically every society. And he would say that the reason this ritual was important for this society is that it marked a transition for one member of the society from one social role to another. From the status of being unmarried to the status of being married. In many societies, kids when they hit the age of puberty go through a rite of passage. This is an official recognition by the society as a whole that this person, who was once considered a child, is now considered an adult and has adult responsibilities.

Van Gennep originally thought that practically all religious rituals were rites of passage. Later social anthropologists have pointed out there's at least one other major class or rituals. And this is not a rite of passage but what we call a "rite of celebration". Very distinct from a rite of passage. In a rite of passage, we talk about a person's transition from one social role to another. In a rite of celebration -- let's take for an example a wedding anniversary -- nothing is changing here. We are simply looking at something which has a permanent value and belief structure, and we are celebrating it. We are focusing on it. We are saying this is important to us. And we're going to have this ritual to let everybody know how important it is to us. A rite of passage is a rite of transition, but a rite of celebration is a rite of intensification. It intensifies the values and beliefs that are already present.

That was one of two ways of classifying religious rituals. The other is the psychological approach. And probably the best writer in this field is Mircea Eliade. He called sacramental rituals -- he had a wonderful phrase for it -- he called them "doors to the sacred". Every sacramental ritual, he said, is an invitation to a religious or sacred experience. An invitation, which you may accept or not. You can either let yourself become a part of a ritual or not. You can make up your mind to distance yourself from it. But its basic design, the basic reason for a sacramental ritual is to give you an invitation to have an experience of the sacred. Which Eliade calls a "hierophany", an experience of the sacred.

Practically all of these experiences involve altered states of perception, in terms of an altered sense of time and an altered sense of space. And we all have these understandings. For example, to most of us a tree is a tree. But what about the tree that you had your treehouse in when you were a little kid? That tree is special. There is no other tree like that tree anywhere else in the world. It is sacred. A funeral home -- you see them on every other street corner; they're just a building. Except the funeral home that you attended your grandfather's funeral in. You walk into that funeral home and space seems different. It is charged with a meaning that normal space -- a normal other funeral home -- does not have.

Time is the same way; the sense of time can change. Anniversaries, celebrations of New Year's, celebrations like that take us back to a time that's kind of outside of time, if you will. And once again, charges that time with a special meaning. Time may even seem to pass differently. I think for me the best expression of this has always been in fairy tales. When somebody goes into the next world, the world of faery, and experiences the passage of time differently.

So all of these -- what Mircea Eliade calls "hierophanies" -- all of them have to do with altered states of perception, which include both time and space. This is remarkably similar, by the way, to Dion Fortune's famous definition of magick, the "ability to alter consciousness at will". We're obviously talking about the same kind of thing here.

Most hierophanies, the great majority of them, are individual. They are personal. Whether it's watching a sunset, visiting a sacred place, walking up to Stonehenge and standing in the center of it (and having the same feeling you had as you stood in your last magic Circle), this is sacred space. This is an individual and personal experience. But these religious experiences can also be shared. It happens when we sing the national anthem. It happens when we sing the old school song. It happens when a group of us gets together to go see a dramatic or theatrical presentation. In this case, we open ourselves collectively to an experience of the sacred. Which again is what a sacramental rite is all about.

One other interesting thing about these experiences is that it is almost universally experienced that the high charge of meaning that is found in the rite is experienced as "discovered" or "encountered". It sort of dawns upon you. "Oh wow! That's what this is all about! Yeah, I get it now!" It's not something that is artificially enforced on the ritual from the outside. It should grow organically from the ritual.

It's interesting to note that in Judeo-Christian tradition, this sacredness is quite often found in history. In the historical development of a God that interacts with a "chosen people" throughout a period of history. Whereas in Pagan theology, sacredness is most usually found not in history but in nature. That every tree, every rock, everything is alive, that you can get in touch with it, that it has a magical and sacred essence and you can interact with that, and get in touch with the Cosmos as a whole through that.

It's interesting to note, too, that because of this the Judeo-Christian tradition places a very strong emphasis on sacred writings, or scripture. Whereas many of the old Pagan religions -- taking the old Druid religion as a fine example -- made it forbidden to write down sacred material. Druids teach it, bards sing it, dancers dance it -- but you don't write it. They realized it was too sacred for that. So we have these very definite distinctions in terms of how we've approached these sorts of things.

Another way of looking at a ritual is this: Most of us are familiar with the way a myth takes the values and beliefs of a religion and embodies them in story form. A ritual takes the values and beliefs of a religion and embodies them in actions. That's why quite often a ritual is a myth enacted. Ritual drama, for example.

As I said at the beginning, I think many Pagans are aware of how Christians have borrowed from us in terms of calendar customs, and how they've borrowed our gods to use as their saints. But we've seldom examined how the Christian religion has borrowed our sacred rites. They have. The Catholic Church now recognizes seven official sacraments. And virtually all of them -- or at least six of them -- have Pagan origins.

First of all, the rite called "Baptism". That's the first ecclesial ritual in the Roman Catholic Church. Or "Christening", as it's sometimes called. It turns out once again that practically every "primitive" culture has similar rites of blessing of a child. In ancient, pre-Christian, Pagan Celtic society, there was a similar rite. It had to do with sprinkling a child with water, passing the child through the smoke of a fire, passing it through a hole in a stone or else touching it to the earth (getting in all the elements here), and quite often passing the child around a circle, handing the baby around so that each person in the circle gets to hold it for a short time. If you want descriptions of this taken from people who seem to remember these pre-Christian ceremonies, look at the work of folklorist Alexander Carmichael in the six-volume set, the "Carmina Gaedelica". Some of these rites had been Christianized, of course, even at the time Carmichael was taking them down. But a lot of their Pagan origins are still very clear.

In Pagan Celtic society, by the way, this rite was called a "seining". Which I would like to propose as a much better term for this kind of rite in Paganism than the more recently coined word "Wiccaning". I oppose that terminology for two reasons. One, it's obviously a word that was coined recently to be a counterpart to the term "Christening". So the word itself is not historically attested. Secondly, think of what it implies! When you "Christen" a child, you are introducing it into the body of Christ, the Church. You are making it a Christian. I don't think that any Witch thinks that "Wiccaning" a child is making that child a Witch! I've never heard any Pagan put it that way. At the very most, you are blessing the child, asking the gods' protection for this child "so that no harm comes to the child, or to anyone else through the child" (as it is commonly expressed) until such a time as that child is able to choose its own religion. We do not attempt to make that choice for the child. It is simply a rite of blessing and protection. Strangely enough, that is exactly what the word "seining" means. And therefore I think it's much better than the alternative "Wiccaning".

The Christian religion also has a sacrament called the "Eucharist". By the way, if ever anybody challenges you that the Christian religion doesn't employ magic, take a look at what the Catholic Church has to say about the sacrament of the Eucharist, or what they call "the blessed sacrament" -- THE blessed sacrament. The official term for what

happens is "transubstantiation" -- that the priest actually has the power to turn common bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus! If that isn't a magical act, I don't know what one is! Although the Church would be loath to use the word "magic" in this context. But we certainly understand what it's all about.

The idea of blessing food and drink, however, once again seems to be one of those universal rites. When people sit down to a shared dinner, a common meal, it is a rite of inclusion. Even in the early Christian Church, you were not allowed to partake in the Eucharistic meal unless you were already a member of that church. So the fact that in the Wiccan tradition you share "cakes and ale" would imply an inclusion in the membership of that group. And of course, there are all the symbolic associations of food as sustenance.

We also have the sacrament of Confirmation in the Catholic Church. Which always sounded strange to me when I was growing up. You know, you're twelve years old now, and it's time for you to be "confirmed". It's almost like up until then you were only "tentative". (LAUGHTER) But now you're confirmed. What it really meant, though, was the person was supposedly old enough by now to make a free choice (cough) of which religion they wanted to belong to. And the bishop -- You'll notice here, by the way, that the proper minister for this rite is the bishop, not the priest. Although it is possible for a bishop to delegate the power to a priest. But the bishop comes and confirms you into this religion. Again, we have so many rites from so many Pagan systems that this seems to based on that are usually referred to as "initiation" ceremonies, or rites of passage, rites of adulthood. When finally the child is brought fully into the religious and social (in most primitive societies, they are the same) structure of the society and is now seen to be a full adult. So any first degree initiation could serve as a model for what the Catholic Church came to call Confirmation.

Ordination. This is a right that ONLY a bishop can perform, in the Catholic Church. Only a bishop can make a priest. You'll notice that when we look at how initiation rites are traditionally done in Wicca, any priest or priestess can make another priest or priestess. And quite often, it looks like in the oldest rites, it also involved a kind of "laying on of hands". There was an imposition of hands that occurred in the Catholic tradition, as well. And until that time, a novice priest was actually told that it would be wrong or DANGEROUS for him to perform some of the priestly functions unless he had been made a priest!

And there were all sorts of stories in the old days that only a priest could touch the consecrated elements. Only a priest's hands -- only consecrated hands -- could touch the vessels that held the consecrated elements: the chalice, the monstrance, the ciborium, and so forth. This almost implies to me, though it's never quite stated in this way, but it almost seems like there is some sort of real, tangible, psychic energy that is present.

I remember being regaled with stories when I was a little kid going to a Catholic school where the nuns would tell these wonderful stories about how some poor person was kneeling at the altar rail waiting to receive Communion, and the priest comes along to administer Communion, and drops the Host. And the poor person reaches out to try to catch it, and at the first touch of this consecrated object, there is a tremendous flash of lightning, and the person is now a little pile of ashes on the altar carpet. (LAUGHTER)

I don't think it's quite like that. But what it may be saying is that some of these powers, even within magical traditions or Pagan traditions, are tangible and do carry some sort of psychic clout. I don't think lightning is going to flash out of the sky and reduce you to cinders. But what we're saying is a metaphor, really, that there may be some kind of psychic backlash if you attempt to wield these magical energies before your training has been finished, before you're ready to handle them, before you understand what you're doing. In the same way that a good psychotherapy session, if it uncovers too much garbage from your subconscious, can throw you backward if you're not ready to deal with the stuff that's dredged up.

For those of you who believe there is some sort of validity to the concept of "apostolic succession", the imposition of hands, it also may imply that, when one priest or priestess makes another priest or priestess, she is passing on a kind of MAGICAL SHIELDING as well. A protection, so that you will be able to handle these magical powers without any ill effect. For those of you who believe that the initiation tradition is valid. Again, if you want to see Pagan

examples of that, look at some of the work done by Alexander Carmichael. There is a rite called a "shielding" where one person kneels, while a second person puts one hand under their knees and the other hand over their head and says "Everything that is between my two hands is protected and seined by the Mother". The Goddess has control of everything in this sphere. It's a passing on of this shielding, that until you have, it might be dangerous for you to experiment with these powers. IF you believe that's a valid idea. (We'll get into questions of validity in just a minute.)

The Christian tradition of marriage, of course... Well, in every society that we know of, we have rituals that talk about people getting together. However, ever since the Judeo-Christian system has come along, we've been firmly locked into only one way of viewing marriage -- a monogamous way of viewing marriage, for one thing -- with very little latitude in terms of variability. If you look at the Pagan idea of Handfasting, if you go back to the Irish pre-Christian brehon laws, you will find that they talk about at least ten different forms of what we today call marriage. These forms include such things as marriage between two people of the same gender, marriage of more than two people (what today we would call a "group marriage"), marriages that only last for a "year and a day" or some other specified time (what today we might call a "trial marriage"), marriages that did not demand sexual exclusivity (what today we would call "open marriage"), "contract marriage", the woman keeping her own name, pre-nuptial and post-nuptial property arrangements. (If you've ever read about the great pillow-talk argument between Queen Maeve and King Aillil about who had the most property, you know what I'm talking about!)

You know, it's fascinating to think that all of the so-called marriage innovations that occurred in the 1960's, that we thought were so mind-bogglingly new... nope! They were all there in the old Pagan form of this rite. They were *standard*, until the Christian form of marriage with its single theme, its monogamous monotheistic vision, it's vision of the one right and only way to do something, came along and knocked the older one aside. But again, the Pagan origins are obvious.

The ecclesial sacrament called "Last Rites"... We have all sorts of what we call "death blessings" in the Gaelic Pagan traditions, to send the spirit on its way. For each person who dies, there is one particular person assigned to be the leader of these rites who from that time on is known as the dead person's "soul friend". This is the one who will carry out the rituals, remember them when Samhain comes around, set out the extra places at the table, etc. We perhaps have less historical data on the Last Rite theme than we have for certain other themes that we're talking about here. But it is still there. And again a reference to some of the early folklorists.

The one modern Christian sacrament that I cannot really find an exact parallel for in terms of a pre-Christian precursor in Paganism is the sacrament the Roman Catholic Church calls "Penance", or "Confession". Isn't that interesting? The whole sacrament has to do with confessing your sins to a priest, who then absolves you of the sins. It is a whole thing of guilt, and release from guilt. Yes?

Morning Glory: There were blood guilt rituals, because if you caused an accidental or even on-purpose death, you had to pay a wyrguild to the family. In the New World, the Aztecs had a thing where if you caused the death of someone, you became a surrogate for that person. So there were things like that.

Mike Nichols: Okay, good point. I can think of an Irish example of that, now that you mention it. The Chucullain legend is a good example. Chucullain, who was originally Setanta, accidentally on purpose kills this very ferocious dog, and walks up to the gate-keeper and says, "I've killed your dog and I would like to replace him." And the gate-keeper says "Fine, there go some cats. Get busy." (LAUGHTER) I think that's where that joke started.

Morning Glory: Samhain was also a time -- and Walpurgisnacht, especially Walpurgisnacht -- was a time when you took stuff from that year and purged it in the fire. And you would have to then go and get it straight with any other people inside the Circle that you shared.

Mike Nichols: I noticed that in a lot of the Pagan traditions, the purging of one's "guilt" (and I think we're very misguided to use the term "guilt" here)...

Morning Glory: Responsibility.

Mike Nichols: Responsibility, right -- is a matter of making recompense to the person or persons who were wronged. It's not a matter of carrying around a guilt trip until somebody says "Okay, if you'll go through this ritual, you will be absolved."

(unidentified): A couple of things I've run into recently, one was in a work of fiction. These three young girls rob this woman who later turns out to be a Witch. It's on this psychic journey where they have the bodies of these 12th century people. And one ends up a peasant. And he couldn't help but notice these weird little Pagan things that kept cropping up that these people had kept for centuries. And one of the things was that on the first day of Spring, the village priest preached a sermon that "dancing leads to damnation". Apparently, on the first day of Spring, all the peasants would go out and dance everything out. And that would really help them out. It got rid of all the pains of the Winter, someone had been murdered, and a baby had died of starvation.

Otter Zell: There was a common form that I can't identify specifically, but it's a theme I've come across in a lot of anthropological studies. But it's the basis of what we call, not a "trial" really, but more like "mediation". If there's a conflict between parties about something or if someone feels they've been wronged by someone, then the parties would be brought together within the community of people, and everybody would have to tell their stories. Then they would ask them "What do you think would be a fair settlement? What do you think would be fair?" And this was just talked out in the context of the community of people, until everything was worked out to everyone's satisfaction. And we've used this ourselves in our Circle under such situations, and it's been incredibly effective, very powerful.

And the ultimate, if this could not be worked out, there were several ways of dealing with it. The heaviest one was generally banishment, where the person would simply be sent away. And the next heaviest one would probably be ostracism, where the person would not be spoken to. He would be ignored, they'd pretend he didn't exist for a period of time. Highly effective. Of course, the more simple and basic ones would be working out appropriate compensation that everyone would be satisfied with. So there were these procedures, but it wasn't the same thing as "guilt". The concept of "sin" and "guilt", and the idea that you could go to a priest instead of the person you'd wronged, and that the priest could absolve your soul of guilt. And we still have that today, where you go to a trial, and the judge finds you "guilty" and he fines you or sends you to jail, but the person who's been fucked over is still fucked over. (LAUGHTER)

Morning Glory: They don't get their money back that you stole. It goes to the State, for some odd reason.

Mike Nichols: Exactly. These are things that I think we all ought to think about. What I'm trying to do in the first part of this presentation is to focus your attention on how we might be able to look at Christian liturgical rites to find information about their predecessors as to how they might have been done in Pagan societies. Because all of these things we've talked about, the so-called "seven sacraments of the Catholic Church -- if you look for data that Jesus himself instituted these things, you look practically in vain. Where in the world did the Church come up with these things?

A great example of this, by the way (and it's an example I use in my class quite often) is this. For a long time, after I decided that I was going to be Pagan, I quit going to the Catholic Church because it didn't interest me. It might have been a mistake. One year while I was at college, I was home for Spring break (it was Easter) and my mother dragged me along to a service that happens on the Saturday night right before Easter, "Holy Saturday" -- which has to be one of the most liturgically rich occasions of the Church calendar. (If you want to see it even richer, take a look at the Orthodox traditions, the Greek and Russian Orthodox. They *really* know liturgics.) At any rate...

I had forgotten how the Catholic Church blesses the holy water that it's going to be using in the coming liturgical year. But what happens, roughly, is this. The holy water font, which is usually in the porch or vestibule of the church, is brought up into the sanctuary and placed near the altar. And at one point in this particular Mass, the priest walks

over to this large candle which is called the Pascal Candle. It is in place throughout the Easter season. It has little herbs stuck in it and so forth. He takes this candle out of its holder, walks over to the holy water or Baptismal font (which looks, from my point of view, remarkably like a large cauldron), and holds the candle over the font, and starts doing *this* with it. (demonstrates by plunging the vertical candle in and out of the holy water font) (GASPS OF RECOGNITION AND LAUGHTER)

(unidentified): You're kidding!

Mike Nichols: I'm NOT kidding. And after having studied Paganism, and I saw that, it was like I was seeing it for the first time. And I looked to the right and to the left to see if anybody else, you know, realized what was going on. I mean, I thought "Aren't there any *Freudians* in the audience?!?!" (LAUGHTER) There was not one flicker of recognition, not one flutter of an eyelid! I could not believe it!

And I knew there and then that obviously the Catholic Church had not picked this up from Jesus. Where had the Catholic Church learned to bless water? From us. And where had the Catholic Church learned to do a lot of other stuff? From us. So, I think it is richly rewarding for us to take a look at what they have done in terms of liturgics.

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: "Pagans take back the rite!" (LAUGHTER)

Mike Nichols: Exactly!! Exactly. I like that! That'll be the title of my new book! (LAUGHTER)

Morning Glory: There's another aspect of that, too, with the Host, the idea of consuming the body of the God. Sacred cannibalism was certainly a factor that this came from. The eating of the pressed grains of Dammuzi or Tammuz, the Green Man, the vegetation god, and the eating of the body of the god, that's definitely ours. Jesus was pretty much captured into the Tammuz cycle, and much that we're working with is still in there.

Mike Nichols: I absolutely agree. And you'll notice that in all this discussion we've only covered the seven basic ecclesial rites of the Church. We're not even talking yet about all the little incidental things the Church calls "sacramentals", like the blessing of holy objects, the consecration of a church altar, the consecration of the church building. Where did the blueprint, where did the pattern for a lot of these rites come from?

Morning Glory: Oh, on that note! The pattern of the church building itself. The idea of having a temple where you did your worshipping on the ground floor, and the basement is where you bury your dead, that is a universal ancient custom. And it's the same whether it's Chartres Cathedral or the so-called "palace of Knosis", which is a necropolis, actually.

Otter Zell:Now, another thing that appears to me to be a sacrament is the concept of purification. And somewhere during the course of what you're saying, I was reminded of a custom of the purification of people who had returned from a war in ancient Pagan cultures. They basically had to pass through the holy women who, by making love with them, would purify and renew them and "take the war out of them". There have been some articles on this recently.

Morning Glory: There is a great book out now called "The Woman Who Slept with Men and Took the War Out of Them". It's by some famous feminist that you've all heard of, and I can't remember her name right now.

Mike Nichols: Sounds good! Okay, let's move on into the area of liturgical theology. What we've been talking about so far is liturgical history, the development of liturgical rites, and how I believe we must focus more attention on that historical development. But now let's take a look at liturgical theology, where we can start splitting theological hairs -- which is always so much fun!

There are so many questions that have plagued Pagans for a long time, and I was *delighted* to find that some of these same questions had plagued the Christians down through the years. And it was fascinating to see what they had to say about it. Some of the greatest minds of the Catholic Church from St. Augustan to Thomas Aquinas, whatever other horrible things they may have done along the way, had some fascinating things to say about these issues.

For example, why are some rituals done only once, like a seining, whereas other rituals are repeated over and over again? Take the Magic Circle itself, there doesn't seem to be any limit on how many times you can do it. Let's look at one possible answer. (But again, I'm gonna throw out more questions than answers here.) But one possible answer is that certain rituals, if properly done (whatever *that* means, and we'll get to that in a minute), have a *permanent* effect on the person who undergoes them. A permanent effect, an "indelible mark" as the old catechism says, that cannot be erased.

Now, the question of how a ritual is to be done. How do you know if a ritual has been done properly? For example, does a ritual have an effect if there are no outwardly observable signs? Any of you who have ever performed an initiation rite, I think this has occurred to you. What happens if the initiation is all done, and the person sits there saying "I don't feel any different. Am I supposed to? Has anything happened to me?" And you will occasionally find people who have been High Priests and High Priestesses for quite a few years, who will perhaps talk more freely about it than others, and among themselves they will talk about whether an initiation "took". Did it "take"? Some of them will say that after an initiation has been completed, the rite was performed, the energies are set in motion, but it may not "take" until after another month, and so forth. That it may eventually take, but not right when the initiation was done. But the energies are there.

Would you believe the same questions have been wrestled with by the Catholic Church? Especially in the early days of Christianity when the rite of Baptism was an adult rite, and it meant that the person was supposed to entirely change their outward behavior, totally give up certain things, and start believing certain things. What if a person went through a Baptism, which is supposedly a magical rite-- In those days, Baptism and Confirmation were virtually the same rite, and could only be done once because it was supposed to be effective the first time. Remember the whole question of the "heresy" of the Re-Baptists was on this precise point. If a person was baptized, that supposedly made them a Christian, which would supposedly end their career of "sin", in the eyes of the Catholic Church. But what if they went out and sinned again? What if they murdered someone? Should they get re-baptized?

The Catholic Church said no, they should not be re-baptized because one Baptism is sufficient. The energies are already in place, but it didn't "take". But only one per customer for the rite itself. Now, it may be that the person was not "spiritually disposed" to receive the energies generated by the sacramental rite. There was some blockage, something stopping them from being receptive. We don't know what this is. That is perhaps one of the reasons the ritual of Penance developed the way it did. Because what do you do with a person who has sinned and yet wants to come back into the body of the Church? (By the way, certain people like the Donatists thought once they've sinned, they're *out*. We *don't* allow them back in.)

(unidentified): My background was Fundamentalist, so I was baptized in the river at about 12. And every time I would leave and come back for a visit, all these people would want me to re- dedicate myself, come up and be re-baptized. Now, is that just a variation of the tradition? I'm trying to figure this out.

Mike Nichols: Yes, it is a variation. When the Protestant Reformation occurred, one of the things that was most held up to scrutiny, in fact, was the way the Catholic Church approached the whole question of sacramental rites. One of the chief questions (which we'll get to in a minute) is whether or not the "worthiness" of the minister is an effective variable in the rite itself. Does a priest in a state of sin-- What if a priest has gone out and murdered somebody? He is in a state of mortal sin, supposedly cut off from God and the Church. What if he then baptizes somebody? Is that Baptism sacred? Is it valid? Or, as a Pagan may put it, is the power in the person doing the ritual, or is the power in the ritual? I think all of us have wondered this, right?

I'll be talking about what some of the various Church Councils have ruled on matters of liturgical theology in a minute. But in this particular instance, the Catholic Church decided that the power was in the rite, in the ritual itself. It didn't matter whether or not the person conducting the ritual was in a state of grace or a state of sin. This is one of the things that Martin Luther took exception to. He felt that the spiritual "health", if you will, of the person performing the ceremony was a variable in how effective the ceremony was. And I'll show you in a minute why the Catholic position disagreed with that.

Morning Glory: The thing about the Fundamentalist attitude about Baptism, it's not a one per customer attitude. And a lot of that has to do with the concept that's called "Baptism of the Holy Ghost", which is an ecstatic experience that is repeatedly craved and repeatedly done. It's like raising the power. So their attitude about Baptism is not that this is a sacralizing agent as much as it is an anointing for the purpose of raising power.

Mike Nichols: Let me ask you a question based on that. If a person undergoes a rite of Baptism and doesn't experience this influx of whatever, Holy Spirit, then is it assumed that they were not baptized?

Morning Glory: Not by the Holy Ghost. If you don't speak in tongues, then you didn't get the Holy Ghost. And that's the sign of it. And they'll keep at it until you get it.

Mike Nichols: Ah! Okay, very good. The reason this ran into problems in the Catholic Church was because of the many priests who were declared to be heretical, in the Albigensens movement, the Cathari movement, etc. What happens if a priest, an *excommunicant* priest, performs a Baptism? Is that Baptism valid?

The Catholic Church said yes, for a number of reasons. First of all, they developed two concepts: validity as opposed to legality. The sacrament, or the rite itself, was considered VALID in that it produced the desired effect on the person. Even if a person came from a heretical sect into the Church, they were not re-baptized. The Baptism only needed to occur once. It left an indelible mark on that person's spirit or soul. It didn't have to be re-done, right? However, that Baptism was ILLEGAL from the point of view of Canon Law. The Canon lawyers, the people who codified the ritual structure of the Catholic Church, would say that this was a VALID but ILLEGAL (or illicit) rite. The priest had no legal right to perform that ceremony.

By the way, in the Catholic Church, under certain special conditions, anybody can baptize, including (are you ready for this?) a non-Christian! In cases of emergency.

Morning Glory: Oh, for Last Rites and stuff!

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: Interestingly enough, in the house I grew up in, the crucifix opened up, and it had all the paraphernalia in it for Last Rites.

Mike Nichols: Which raises some interesting questions for Pagans. You know, Whitley Streiber recently told that wonderful story about how he was taken by this group of people to perform some sort of "witchcraft" ceremony, and it turned out these people were Fundamentalists in disguise who did something horrible to a goat, sacrificed it or something, and went through this whole thing... Let's say, for some reason, that some Fundie took it upon herself to portray the role of a Pagan priestess and took somebody through a Pagan initiation. Is it valid? What if they copied the rites exactly out of whoever, Starhawk, Adler, Farrar, Gardner, whoever?

(unidentified): "Valid but illegal". (LAUGHTER)

Mike Nichols: What if the person who undergoes the rite has a wonderful experience? Let me suggest to you how the Catholic Church responded to that. It is valid for the same reason that a Baptism performed even by a non-Christian is valid because the person who confers the effects of the rite is not the minister, but God! So in this case,

we could say it is the Goddess, or Whoever, who bestows that feeling on the initiate of having been initiated. And the minister's part was negligible.

But that leads us into other problems, doesn't it? That's saying that the rite itself, not the minister performing the rite, is what gets it done. In the case of the Catholic Church, this concept was legally defined by the Latin phrase "ex opere operato", "by the work worked". In other words, it is the rite itself, the power was in the ritual, not in the person who performed the ritual. Yes, Otter?

Otter Zell: Well, there's got to be criteria we're dealing with here. I mean, the fact that the Church decides what makes it valid, that seems to be beside the point. To me, the person who has to decide is the person who experiences it. I mean, if you say "Okay, Domine Domine, you're all Catholics now" and somebody says "Not me!", then they're *not*... aren't they? (LAUGHTER)

(unidentified): If it's the Middle Ages, they're *dead*. (LAUGHTER)

Otter Zell: They used to do that. The Church would come and they would just march an entire village through the ford, you know, and they would say "Now you're all Christians." And the people would say, "Wait a minute! I'm not a Christian. I'm going to continue worshipping Thor or Odin or whatever" (because it was mostly Scandinavian countries they did this to). How can you say they're Christians anyway, in spite of the fact they don't want to be? I mean, aren't we missing something here?

Mike Nichols: I think you're right. And I think the whole focus of this is to start people thinking on questions about validity, and legality if it comes to that, in terms of Pagan rites. I am not for a moment suggesting we follow the Christian precedent in these matters. But they can indicate questions we need to think about in terms of what *our* response to that, as Pagans, should be.

Here's another example. If the rite *itself* is effective... I bet any of you have gone through this. You have a student and you're teaching the student to do a ritual, right? How to cast a Circle for the first time. (Where's the sun? Okay...) Start in the North, start with your Sword, and say "Okay, student, now *do this*! 'Oh thou Circle, be thou a meeting place--' And you walk the thing out for them. You come back around to where you were and you say "Okay, did you see that? That's how you cast a Circle." And then you go "Wait a minute! Did I just cast a Circle?" We've all thought about that. Morning Glory?

Morning Glory: Yes, but, yes, but when I have done this, or when I do a demonstration at all, I don't put the power out. You can even say the words, or you can walk it out, but you don't put the astral fire down. You don't lay down the astral fire. Unless you're showing someone how to lay the astral fire down, in which case...

Mike Nichols: You're doing it. (LAUGHTER) Well, the same question arose in the Catholic Church, and the answer is remarkably similar. It came up this way. If a priest was teaching a novice priest how to say Mass, how to perform the Eucharist, and he actually pronounces the words of consecration, and unbeknownst to him there is a small crumb of bread on the table in front of him, is that now a holy crumb? Because the Catholic Church had by now decided, remember, that the power was in the ritual itself rather than in the person. So if the ritual is done correctly, the proper words are said (and we'll get into that in a minute, too: What are the proper words? What are the proper gestures?), that crumb now is "the body and blood of Christ", isn't it?

Again, this took a lot of quibbling, but before it was all over the Catholic Church decided no, that crumb would NOT be the body of Christ because of one little thing that was left out. One thing that the minister does have to supply: "intentionality". Intent! The person performing the rite has to have the intent to be performing this sacred, magical rite. This was also true, by the way, of that non-Christian who was baptizing somebody. If the non-Christian was

doing it as a joke, it would not be considered valid. However, if a non-Christian sincerely wanted to baptize somebody else as a Christian, and had that intent, and did the rite with all of its elements properly, that person was, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, baptized. Otter?

Otter Zell: Now, here's a question that concerns a lot of us Pagans directly. A lot of us, when we were newborn babies and unable to speak in our own best interests, were baptized. (LAUGHTER) So, now, theoretically, once you're baptized, you're a Christian. Well, uh... How do you deal with that? I know I'm not a Christian. I sure don't feel like a Christian.

Morning Glory: It's like getting a tattoo removed, or something. (LAUGHTER)

Otter Zell: Is there any way to get un-baptized? I mean, what do you do about that?

Dix: Even if you go through, as I did, a free-choice baptism, when you weren't screaming and protesting, then later on you decide that this is all bullshit, it doesn't exist, I don't believe in this stuff any more. Now maybe you're still a Christian in the eyes of the Church, but that doesn't matter any difference, because I don't care about the Church.

(unidentified): Right, I was just wondering, is there some way the Church could recognize an way of un-baptizing yourself?

(unidentified): There is. Sitting through their boring rituals. (LAUGHTER)

Otter Zell: But if you're not a Christian anymore,... I mean, there has to be some way of dealing with that.

(unidentified): Otter, in whose eyes are you not a Christian? In your eyes or their eyes? And at what point do their eyes start mattering to you? Whatever they consider has no bearing on you.

Otter Zell: It's not a matter so much of whose eyes. I'm just kind of wondering, from the point of view of magical stuff, you know, how one would interpret this. I mean, I know I'm not a Christian and I'll certainly be happy to argue the case with any of you that might wish to do so. But from a purely magical, ritual perspective, if this magical ritual is done that has this effect-- *Does* it have this effect? Do all these people who were baptized, does that make them Christian? Or is it just bullshit?

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: Look at it this way, Otter. They stole almost everything from us anyway, so what difference does it make? (LAUGHTER)

Mike Nichols: (laughing) What you are doing, and what we're all doing here, is beginning to develop questions about Pagan liturgical theology. We are breaking new ground here, is what I think. Well, I hope the word structure, if it has to be used at all, is used very advisedly. I think Otter has already suggested one possible Pagan response to this question, and that is that the validity depends to some extent on the person upon whom the rite is performed. That's one possibility. But what are all the ramifications of this response, this theological stance? Okay, there was somebody over here, yes?

(unidentified): One point about what the Church was doing is that they had no competition. People were not given a choice, and the Church had the military to back them up. So that when they said "This village is now Christian," they *knew* that that village was not Christian. But they knew that, with no information and no rituals allowed or anything, that the great- grandkids would probably be Christian. Eventually they would be assimilated into what they wanted, into the type of person they wanted, because any radical would be killed.

(unidentified): I think you could make an analogy between becoming un-Christian and getting a divorce. When I got my divorce, I didn't have a special ritual for that, but I needed that, that sense of closure, that sense of separation in a ritual form. And I think that could be developed very easily. And I think that also could apply to becoming un-baptized.

Mike Nichols: Good. This whole things raises a very important question just from the psychological point of view for most Pagans. Do we *need* an un-Christening rite?

(unidentified): From my viewpoint, when I was getting baptized, for some reason I swear to God I thought he was going to drown me, and I came up halfway through the "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" which he snarled at me later for. So I sorta screwed up mine whether I knew it or not.

(unidentified): On the question of Baptism, in the Christian church, in a metaphysical sense, Baptism is not all that's required for salvation. It must still be worked out within the Christian faith. If you do not work it out, then the Baptism is a ritual that has not been fulfilled. It's the fulfillment that makes you a Christian or not.

Mike Nichols: That's exactly right. Good point. Ellen?

Anahita: I have two things to say. One, regarding my Baptism, I had the opposite experience. I mean, I took swimming lessons, and they'd all prepared us, and I was ready to go under and hold my breath and come out transformed. And they did it so casually and so intellectually, it was like, okay this is enough. And the tip of my nose didn't go under! (laughing) My Achilles heel is the tip of my nose! So this is where I got to be Pagan! (LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE)

The other thing had to do with a Pagan ritual that we did that might have some applications in this, where we just recently formed a Circle from a Circle that had existed previously. And we did a ritual to very gently and caringly disband the other Circle in the best possible light and bring all the good things in. I would hate to see a Pagan ritual that just cancelled somebody's past, because however you come into Paganism is what you were, in toto, including your Baptism. And what many of us are mentioning, our religious experiences contribute to our ability to relate to the Goddess as a Pagan, because that's who you are. And if it was a fantastic Baptism, then so be it. I mean, I've had screaming, crying, evangelical services, and that's how I learned about spiritual ecstacy.

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: You know where they got that from. They stole it from Voudoun, historically.

Anahita: They stole it from every place. But it was a real experience, you know, and that's your basis for comparison.

Mike Nichols: Let me comment on that point. One of the big educational experiences I've had recently-- One of my dear friends here in Kansas City is someone you've all seen here in the last few days, Rhiannon, the one who stood on the chair-- She's a High Priestess that I respect with all my heart and love very much as a good friend, but we had never actually worked together until relatively recently. And I was astounded at the difference in our approach. She, coming from a very Protestant background, encourages you at every point in the ritual to speak from your heart, practically never do anything the same way twice. You know, you go to the Watchtower and invoke it using words that come into your head at that moment, etc. Me, with my stolidly Roman Catholic background, doing the same rituals and the same repetitive patterns almost mantra-like time after time and expecting the same results.

We'll get into, if we have time, the pros and cons of these two approaches. Obviously, both of them valid approaches, right? Both of them seem to work for each of us. Vastly different. And obviously conditioned by our original religious upbringing. Yes?

Morning Glory: I want to bring up this question of validity again. If you were initiated by a particular Alexandrian couple who shall remain nameless, as many friends of mine were, and this Alexandrian couple have repudiated their Craft credentials and have become born-again Christians, and they're going around on the circuit with their story of "I was a Pagan"-- All of the people that those people initiated-- It would be like the priests who went out and killed someone and then--

Mike Nichols: Or perhaps a better analogy, like the schismatic bishops who split away from the Church and continue to ordain new priests. Are those valid priests?

Morning Glory: Exactly. Yes. Well, that is an issue that we as Pagans need to think about.

Mike Nichols: You know, in all of this discussion, I am working from the premise that we are at too early a stage to formulate answers. But I think it's high time we started articulating the questions.

Anahita: Well, I can speak to that a little bit, too. I just went to the 20th anniversary ritual for NROOD. And I was amazed, because I had a lot of contact with them about 13 years ago when they were a seven year old religion. And the *changes* that they have gone through in 20 years, I'm here to tell you, are just really amazing! I mean, they were light and free and it's so wonderful! Now, it's like, a lot of dogma. It *was* a wonderful ritual and a wonderful time was had by all. But they had changed some things in a very valid way, something that didn't work and was probably better this way. But 13 years ago, it was "Oh, those! Name it: Alexandrians, Gardnerians, Orthodox Druids, whatever! You just have to have enough stars in your hat to hang out with them." Well, now, guess what? You have to have enough stars in your hat to hang out with NROOD! (LAUGHTER) I mean, it's just really amazing. So, we can ask questions till we're blue in the face, but the answers are gonna be different in five years.

Mike Nichols: I hope that somebody chronicles those changes as they go. They're going to be fascinating. Let me throw out another important question of liturgical theology. Is there a way to *botch* a Pagan ritual so that it is non-valid or non- effective, so that it doesn't work or *worse*, causes some kind of magical boomerang effect that causes some sort of detriment?

For example, what if you teach somebody how to invoke the Watchtowers, and you only tell them about three of them? What's gonna happen in the Circle when they only invoke three? Is anything? Does it matter? Does anything matter? (LAUGHTER) I mean, does it, are there certain things that have to be there? Are there certain elements?

From the perspective of the Catholic Church, for example, a Baptism had to have certain specific components to be valid. A certain set of materials had to be present: the water, the salt to put on the baby's tongue, etc.; a certain set of words had to be present; the minister who performed it had to be a valid minister (which, in the case of Baptism, could be anyone), and so forth.

Let me give you a quick example. It's been quite a few years ago, but in my own Coven we were training somebody who was new as a priestess. She had actually been instructed correctly in invoking all four of the Watchtowers but, as it happened, when she took the four elements around, things were confused that night. It was her first ritual. And, somehow, something got left out. And a little bit later, during the Circle, we were doing some divinatory work, with a Ouija board. And please! In my tradition, we use a Ouija board for divinatory work. At any rate, halfway through the ritual, there was some kind of manifestation which at least a good portion of us saw. It looked like a kind of cloudy, dark hand had reached over the planchette. (I hate to be telling a bad Ouija board story because they're maligned enough!) (LAUGHTER)

But this kind of cloudy-looking hand reached in over the Ouija board. And everybody sort of jumped back like they were shocked. And I think most people there were thinking, "What the heck is that?" But my first thought (again, maybe because of my religious upbringing) was "How did that thing get into a carefully warded Circle?" There should not *be* any extra energy or entity in here that we didn't call ourselves, or want! And I started going back over

the procedure and realized that (in our system, it is the incense that represents the element of Air) this particular priestess had not taken the incense around the Circle at the time of the consecration of the Circle. So, from a purely legalistic point or whatever, the Circle had not been consecrated by the element Air. Which theoretically would allow some sort of sylph or air-related entity to get through. You know, it wasn't properly warded by all four elements.

Can you screw up a rite? I mean, what things *have* to be present in order for there to *be* a Circle? And what things can be left out? What things can you change? What things can you *not* change? Yes, Carolyn?

Carolyn Clark: I have a story that relates to that. One day a long, long time ago, when I was very, very new to the Craft, I knew a girl named Michelle who liked to dabble in Ceremonial Magick. And I knew a little bit about Ceremonial Magick. (Famous words: "I knew a little bit about Ceremonial Magick.") (LAUGHTER) So we did a Mars ritual. We did it on the right day, Tuesday night. And it was a little bit out in the country because Michelle was into cultivating certain controlled substances. And, in the middle of the ritual, there were red lights flashing in all the windows, and I thought "Oh, shit! It's the fuzz!" So we hurried up and finished the ritual, banished the Circle, looked out the window and... there weren't any cops there. There was nobody there.

Mike Nichols: I think a very *common* experience of this sort, which most of us probably have experienced in the course of our magical training at one time or another, is how it feels to be psychically kicked in the head when power is not correctly grounded. (EXCLAMATIONS OF AGREEMENT) Right? How many can relate to that? Otter?

Otter Zell: One that I've encountered a number of times in rituals I've gone to over the years, in particular with a group I prefer not to mention because Ellen has already done that (LAUGHTER) is this sort of arbitrary choice of directions. "Well, which way feels like East today?" And I've actually attended these things where with great pomp and ceremony someone will face the south and invoke the East. And then we'll maybe turn to the west and invoke the South. You never know where they're gonna go.

Mike Nichols: There are actually instructions like that in some popular book on the Craft. Is it the Farrars? It actually says in it that it doesn't matter where the directions are as long as everyone agrees upon them.

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: They call that "consensus reality". (LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE)

Chris: It also raises the question of basic styles, and various traditions. I've been in this situation where I was doing some chakra work, and this person I was working with just didn't understand the symbolism. And I was in pain for days.

Mike Nichols: I think the best analogy here is "small child with chemistry set". (LAUGHTER)

Morning Glory: "Talking Wicca Blues", I think, is the final word on that. (LAUGHTER)

Mike Nichols: Yes, yes! Okay, but see, all of these questions all bear on the same point: What is really necessary for that ritual to be done effectively (and *safely*, in many cases)? What things about a ritual can you change without hurting the nature of that ritual? What things can't you change? Morwen?

Morwen: I've seen a lot of recipe books and I've seen a lot of possible recipes for the same dish. If you're going to be attending a Circle where you invoke the four quarters, then you'd better remember to do the correct things at each one, or you could leave a gap. Just like if you're baking a cake, you'd better remember the baking soda, and remember to butter the pan. But if you're going to do a Circle where you're not going to do the quarters, you could invoke the magic Circle without even thinking about the four directions. Because you're invoking a magic Circle based on a different structure.

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: There was a guy at Pagan Spirit Gathering whose particular approach to Paganism was to get ideas from the old Celtic traditions. And he says he can't find anything that justifies the invocation of quarters, the quarter points. He was convinced there was no such thing as quarter points in the way the Celts practiced their religion.

Mike Nichols: I might argue with that, based on their stone circles and such. But on the other hand, I'd be willing to bet that the way quarter points got into modern Wicca was through ceremonial magick. I don't think there's any doubt about that.

Morning Glory: But isn't it interesting that Native Americans have the same thing in the Medicine Wheel? It may be that there's a certain universality in the four quarter points.

Otter Zell: It also connects with the natural world. We're all trained in levels of metaphor and the magic Circle itself is a metaphor for so many different cycles. It's a metaphor for any cycle, and cycles can be broken up in different ways. But certainly the four-quarter system works awfully well on a planet that rotates around its axis, which gives you four directions.

Mike Nichols: The basic question we're raising here is, can somebody just create their own ritual system from scratch? Or does it have to link up to the real world around us?

Otter Zell: I've seen certain systems that are just made up out of whole cloth, and they're presented as valid traditions by the people who just make them up, and they're just somehow cuckoo. They don't feel right. Remember, there was this anti-astrologer guy running around, Owen Rachel, and he was anti-magic, and anti-Pagan and everything else. So then he came out with this book of weird astrology, called "Sky Triangles" or something like that, or "Sky Diamonds". And it was supposed to be his astrological system, and it was supposed to be more valid. And he just made up this weird bullshit, and none of it made any sense, and none of it worked. But he sold a lot of books.

Anahita: But sometimes you can make up a system and it *does* work. And I loved your answer, incidentally, Mike. I didn't have to ask my question because you answered it. The way you were talking about it was, "In my tradition, it's important to invoke the four quarters..." And I thought, "Aha! But you can decide to have a Circle that doesn't use four quarters."

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: And even when you think you're making something up from scratch, you find out later that somebody else thought of it already. I created a magical ritual based on the "Silmarilion", which Mike and I actually performed. And it had six quarter points. And I found out later on that some Native Americans in Oregon and Washington have six. It was exactly the same thing that I did. I had up and down in mine. I had never heard of that before.

Otter Zell: If you understand the concept of how the energy works, of how the elements of the thing work... It's like, you can make up a recipe yourself if you understand how to cook, if you understand how to season, and so on. You can get to where you're making this stuff up and it'll work. But if you don't understand the patterns and the elements that well...

Morning Glory: "Small child with chemistry set".

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: It gives a whole new meaning to "Magic Chef". (LAUGHTER)

Mike Nichols: Let me bring this back to something here... As far as the final determination of the Catholic Church as to what consists of a valid sacrament, they came up with these things. And it might be interesting to at least note them, to see what we would have to say about them from a Pagan perspective. But to be a valid

sacramental rite -- And again, this is magic in the views of the Ca-- I mean, they don't call it magic, but a sacrament to the Catholic Church is an "effective" ritual, meaning that it has an actual objective effect. Magic, in other words.

So, a rite had to have what was called the proper "matter" and "form", first of all. "Matter" pertains to the materials used, as well as the gestures used. The "form" had to do with the words that were spoken. In magical contexts, you might think of this as the incantation, that part of the spell which is spoken. It had to be performed by the proper minister. Now, this could vary depending on the particular rite. Only a bishop could ordain a priest, but anyone could perform a Baptism, even non-Christians. And finally, it had to have intentionality on the part of the performing minister. So, in the view of the Catholic Church, it is impossible to accidentally, or inadvertently, perform a sacramental rite. That is not possible, from the point of view of Canon law.

Now, I'm not suggesting that Paganism take this same approach. I'm just suggesting that we in the Pagan movement think about it. Canon lawyers were then assigned the task of codifying which things were needed for a particular rite. Think of the way rites were elaborated. You know, a Baptismal rite, in terms of Canon law, consisted of a very few things. Actually, it didn't even include the salt. Just the pouring of the water, and the speaking of the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." That was sufficient for the rite. Now, if you've ever actually gone to a Church Baptism, you know that it is elaborated endlessly. This thing can be carried out for hours if the minister wants to. But the only thing that's really *necessary*, the bare minimum requirements for a valid right, are just those words, and those elements, performed by the right minister, with proper intention.

Interestingly enough, when the Catholic Church started doing this, it led to a kind of minimalist approach in terms of rituals. The priests had been taught that the power of the rite was in the rite itself. It only needed to have A, B, and C in order to be effective or valid. Therefore, they only did A, B, and C. And it didn't matter what kind of state of grace the minister was in. So they started rushing them through pretty quickly. This is one of the main things that Martin Luther took exception to, and it gave birth to the Protestant Reformation. Because priests had been performing these ceremonies almost by rote, with the bare minimum standards in terms of Canon law as to what was required for an effective or valid sacrament.

Morning Glory: There was a lot of issue about that, especially in regard to marriage, whether a marriage was valid or legal. And whether the children of that union were legitimate or illegitimate depended upon how it was done, and whether there were elements that were missing. If somebody didn't say, or refused to say, "I do", for instance. Because lots and lots of women were married against their will. It's like in "The Princess Bride": "Did you say 'I do'?" "No, I didn't." "Well, in that case, you weren't." (LAUGHTER)

Dix: What you were saying about elaborating a ritual... That brings up a question. When you are doing a rite, and you are adding more stuff, can you detract from it? At what point do the additions, the accretions that you keep adding on, where does it begin to take away from the rite?

Mike Nichols: I know that certainly it can diminish the psychological dimension of a rite. I've seen so many examples where, say, you're doing an initiation tonight. Now that means, to me, the whole thing should focus on this person's initiation. It is *their* night. But somebody else over here has another spell they want to do, and somebody over here has something they want to do, and by the time the whole thing is done, it's this incredible mish-mash with no central focus whatsoever. To me, very bad in terms of liturgical design.

Morning Glory: It's aesthetically piss-poor. (LAUGHTER)

Mike Nichols: Right. I meant to conclude this whole workshop (or whatever the heck it is) with a section on liturgical design or aesthetics, which we're just beginning to touch on. It's obvious that we won't be able to get into that too much, but I think it's good that we bring up at least some points about aesthetics. Yes?

(unidentified): Yeah, but what if you have the proper elements of the ritual, and you do things in the right order, and you intend for it to be a magical ceremony, and it's just dead. No one's excited, half the people can't remember their lines, or are making them up on the spot without putting a lot of thought into it. There's no spirit there.

Morning Glory: Their hearts are pure, but their theater is lousy. (LAUGHTER)

Mike Nichols: Yes. Good intentions is not a valid excuse for poor ritual. Absolutely. To me, well, I've often used a communications model for rituals. To me, like language, rituals have a certain grammar, a certain syntax that it needs to follow, a certain order. For example, let's say you're doing a Circle and it's a high holiday, so you're doing a typical holiday celebration but, as a part of that, you're also doing an initiation. When does the initiation come? Well, to me, it seems obvious that the initiation should come during the early part of the evening ceremonies so that, once that person is initiated, they may now participate fully in the seasonal celebration. Right? Rather that leaving them out for it, and doing their initiation at the end.

So, it seems to me that there is sort of a logic of rituals, a grammar, a syntax, for doing ritual. Now, just because you learn the rules of that grammar (and I suspect there are some very definite rules that we could get into if I had the time), but just because you know the rules of grammar doesn't make you a great writer.

Morning Glory: Persistence is nine-tenths of any art, not that it helps to be nine-tenths of an artist. (LAUGHTER) There's another part of this, which is the problem of the hodge-podge ritual. When you have conflicting elements. When somebody wants to do a ritual to heal the earth. And someone else wants to do a ritual to get prosperity for their Aunt Sadie. And someone else wants to do something to get a new house. And some things are really quite conflicting. One group wants to do a ritual to heal the earth, and so they want to put this mellow energy out. But someone else says, "Yeah, but we wanna stop those bulldozers that are coming in, so we wanna get this martial energy to zap their transmissions and make them fall out on the road!" And so then there's this conflict on how to approach things, and things can get really out of hand.

Carolyn Clark: Where we see that a lot is where somebody will come to the Circle and say, "I really need to get in touch with the Demetre part of me." Or, I really need to get in touch with such-and-such god-form. And my response is, "Yes, you need to do that. Then, do it. But not at this Circle."

Morning Glory: It's like chocolate icecream and limburger cheese.

Mike Nichols: I find the same problem in combining elements from different traditions. That's a problem for me. Now, theologically, I might agree that all the names of the Goddess are merely different aspects of the same Goddess. Fine. But I still have a problem thinking, how is the goddess Demetre going to get along with the goddess Arianrhod or Cerridwen? (LAUGHTER) They're very different forms, and to me, well, another analogy I sometimes use is, let's say you're in a new home and you want one room of this home to be a library. You know you want certain things to be in that library, to make it a library. You're gonna want shelves for the books. You're gonna want the books. You're gonna want a comfy chair to sit in and read. You're gonna want a reading lamp near it. You're gonna want a library table, perhaps, or a writing desk. And so forth.

But let's say you go out and you buy early American bookshelves. You buy an Edwardian writing desk. You buy Victorian chairs. You buy modern chrome and glass lighting fixtures. What you have is a library, granted, because all of the elements are there. But nothing fits aesthetically. It's like a ritual smorgasbord. To me, the elements have to fit together aesthetically in order to work right.

(unidentified): I've tried to walk a fine line between Feminist and Traditional Wicca, because I like both. But how does this work for a solitary, or a person who has little access to a Coven? I've had a very hard time designing my own rituals. I found a little books that tells the elements on what goes in a ritual, and I try to follow that. Even though

I may take a little bit from Doreen Valiente, because I like the way she says this one thing. But then the Farrars have a lot. And then I'll stick in a little Starhawk. But the thing is, they're all geared more to Covens. Now, does that make it invalid for a solitary?

Mike Nichols: I would-- Please! Don't start asking me what's valid! (LAUGHTER) See, there's a danger in even discussing this because there's always a danger of falling into that trap.

(unidentified): Is there a way to get in touch with other Solitaries?

Morning Glory: There is a Solitary convention.

Chris: Single rooms everywhere! (LAUGHTER)

Mike Nichols: Scott Cunningham has a book coming out geared to Solitary Craft work. Let me answer the first part of your question first. I think it is possible to be eclectic and yet to avoid eclecticism within one particular ritual. Do tonight's ritual as a Celtic ritual, and next month's ritual as an Egyptian ritual if you want to, but don't mix Celtic and Egyptian in the same ritual. That's at least my point of view, my bias. I'm not saying that's some sort of dogma or rule about liturgics. It's my aesthetic, and I think aesthetics are important to ritual.

Carolyn Clark: When you're working on certain things, when you're doing a very tight ritual-- For instance, if I'm doing a ritual to get in touch with that part of the Mother and that part of me which fructifies and causes creativity to flower, then I would probably call on all the Goddess names, all the aspects of the Goddess from all cultures, that do that one thing.

Mike Nichols: Yes, I understand that completely. As a matter of fact, one of the forms I most love that I learned from the Roman Catholic tradition is that called a litany, a reading of a long list of petitions or names of Goddesses and Gods. And that is so effective in a Pagan ritual, especially if its done as a responsorial. That can build power like you just wouldn't believe! I use that quite a lot in my own rites.

Let me jump to another subject which was raised earlier: the tension which exists between those things which are spontaneous in a ritual, where you just think up something to say on the spur of the moment, as the spirit moves you, as it were; or those people who follow rites that are very patterned, very repetitious, very rhythmic, if you will. Now, I was certainly brought up in that school of thought. And one thing that I've read recently, which I found to be a fascinating argument in favor of that tradition -- not invalidating the other, but in support of the repetitious tradition -- is that recent studies of the left hemisphere / right hemisphere brain split have shown something very interesting.

Language, as you know, is a very linear system. And typically, that is a left hemisphere brain function. Anytime you are composing a sentence -- what I'm doing up here right now -- is very left hemisphere. Whenever someone is confronted with making up the invocation at each Watchtower, they are virtually working entirely left hemisphere. Whenever you are working with language, I was originally taught, you are working with left hemisphere.

There is an interesting exception. Those things that are words that are commonly repetitious. When you sing a Christmas carol year after year after year, to the point you don't even have to think about the words as you sing it, your right brain hemisphere is operating just about on a par with the left, according to studies.

Carolyn Clark: I do that with chanting. While my left brain is occupied with that, my right brain is free to do all kinds of other things.

Mike Nichols: Right! It's sort of like a mantra. You know, for people from Protestant backgrounds, it sometimes comes off like, well, those Catholics just say their prayers by rote. "HailMaryfullofgracetheLordiswiththee." They can toss those off in no time at all. There's no power in it, there's no feeling in it, there's no spirit in it. The other point of

view, however, is that the actual words themselves sort of take a back seat to the meaning, which is superimposed on top of those. And I can tell you from doing rituals in my life in the highly repetitive way, I feel like you, that it has freed my mind to go to perhaps deeper levels than if I had to do it differently every time.

And by the way, notice how that's true in group rituals, too. If the High Priestess -- and I see a lot of this today -- she will not do the same ritual twice! And consequently, the entire Coven is sort of sitting back watching the High Priestess, saying, "Okay, what's she gonna do *this* time?" Never allowing them to really get into the ritual in a psychological way. When you're already familiar with something, like that Christmas carol, it enables everybody to participate fully, because they know what's going to happen, they know what to expect. They're not looking for changes in the script.

Another thing that's interesting about that kind of repetitive work is that, when you do throw in a change, for a particular seasonal variation or something, it stands out. It stands out in contrast to the way you've always done it before. At a Handfasting, when you invoke the blessing of the Lord and Lady, instead of "onto ALL who stand before Thee", you say "onto TWO who stand before Thee", the changing of the words immediately focuses on the couple becoming handfasted. You hear that change; it registers.

Anahita: But isn't that same thing true for an aesthetic, well-worded, channelled experience, that a Priestess may have?

Mike Nichols: Yeah, but it sorta does put everyone else in the position of spectator. It becomes a spectator sport nine times out of ten. Or else, you are actively, consciously, left- hemispherically being involved in the production of this dramatic play. You're not getting to relax and simply experience the *known*, and the comfortable. And that's what I think we need to have more of.

By the way, whenever you have repetition, you also have rhythm. And this brings in a whole different dimension. The drumming, the chanting, and everything else that goes with repetition. I think good ritual pacing has a rhythm of its own.

Something else that we totally ignore these days in liturgical design is the use of silence, which can be VERY powerful. You know how something happens which is really meaningful and everyone's wowed by it, and somebody else just goes right into the next thing. Doesn't let you have the chance to absorb that at all. I'm not talking about that kind of deadly silence where nothing is happening and no one knows what to do. No. I'm talking about those quiet moments that really empower what you've just experienced. Yes, Eldoreth?

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: Well, as someone else who was "lowered" Catholic (as opposed to "raised" Catholic), there is a problem when you have something that is repetitious. Unless the person really wants to be empowered by this, what their mind is most likely to do is to think about anything BUT the ritual. At least as a child, I found this true. "Okay, time to daydream. It's the same old thing again."

Mike Nichols: I think a great deal of the blame there has to do with the fact that as children, you were indoctrinated into this before the time you were ready to think about it. You didn't understand the rite. Nobody had explained it to you. You were simply going through the motions. To me, that's not magic, that's superstition. When you just go through the motions. It's just mumbo-jumbo.

I don't want to run overtime, and we already are a minute or two. Let me just conclude by saying that what I feel we've been doing here is ground-breaking work. I was *delighted* to have a group of people already so involved and so experienced, to have made such wonderful contributions. I'd like to welcome you all as being, I think, some of the first Pagan liturgical theologians around. (LAUGHTER) And I hope you'll continue working on it. Thank you! (APPLAUSE)

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: Mike, I have an alternate title for your book.

Mike Nichols: What's that?

Eldoreth Grey Squirrel: "The Rite Stuff." (LAUGHTER AND GROANS OF APPRECIATION)

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